Cuba Puts Navy And Air Force on Alert Against U.S.

MIAMI, Dec. 18 (UPI) — Cuba put its air and naval forces on alert today, saying it would not be "intimidated" by President Nixon's military alert or his demand that a captive American sea captain be freed.

Cuba's official Communist newspaper "Granma," in a statement read over Havana Radio, warned that "Cuba will not be intimidated by the hysterical campaigns and bluffing of the Nixon government."

At the United Nations, Cuban Ambassador Ricardo Alarcon, in a speech to the General Assembly, announced the armed forces alert in his country. He said the alert was in support of Cuba's policy of "proceeding against any ships engaged in piracy against Cuba.

The Fidel Castro regime put the island's air and naval forces on alert less than 12 hours after refusing to release the captain of the Miami-based freighter Johnny Express, strafed and captured by Cuban gunboats in international waters 120 miles off Cuba Wednesday.

After learning of Cuba's refusal to release Capt. Jose Villa, 55, a naturalized American citizen, the U.S. State Department denounced the Cuban seizure of the Johnny Express and her sister ship, the Lyla Express, earlier this month.

"The United States is prepared to take all measures under international law to protect U.S. citizens and the freedom of the seas against these attacks in the Caribbean area," State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey said.

A short time later, the Department of Defense ordered naval and air forces in the vicinity of the Caribbean on special alert.

Although the five major Navy and Air Force bases in Florida confirmed today they had received the Pentagon's alert, base spokesmen candidly admitted that no leaves had been cancelled and that their base operations were "normal and unchanged."

The Granma statement said, "Our people are not afraid of any imperialist threat.

"And just in case Nixon thinks he can intimidate the Cuban people, air and naval units of the revolutionary armed forces have also been put on alert."

The Cuban government then reiterated charges that the two captured ships, owned by the anti-Castro Babun brothers of Miami, were "pirate ships" in the service of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The Granma editorial called McCloskey's denial that the Johnny Express and Lyla Express were connected with the U. S. government "a shameful lie" comparable to the U.S. government's original denial of any involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

"We shall maintain our determination to proceed without hesitation against the ships that carry out pirate acts against Cuba at any distance from our coast and whatever the flag or camouflage they employ as a front to carry out their misdeeds," the Cuban newspaper said.

Capt. Villa's wife and children visited briefly with President Nixon at his vacation retreat at Key Biscayne Thursday, and later the White House promised that a "vigorous" effort would be made to obtain Villa's release.